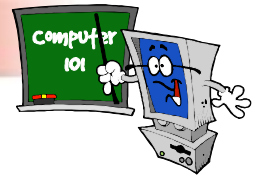# Typical "Atypical" E-mail
Believe it or not?!

Background

Recently, SARS rages in Hong Kong. Everyday we receive abundant information on SARS not only from mass media like television and newspapers, but also from other channels such as the e-mail. It is the e-mail that we, the youth, tend to use most often to receive "atypical" information.

It is really not an exaggeration to "crown" the e-mail as the single most important instrument for disseminating "atypical" information. From the e-mail, we receive information with no or little source reference and of doubtful content. But at the same time, it is also astounding hearsay which interests us most. More importantly, not all the information from the e-mail is untrue. If we take the information on its surface value, it will probably lead to trouble. At its best, the e-mail might just cause embarrassment. At its worst, it may lead to fear and anxiety, and turmoil in society as in the case of a 14-year-old student spreading rumour on the net that the HKSAR has been declared an infected city.

To assess the credibility of a piece of information is not an easy task. Credibility is influenced by many factors. Some information is deliberately made up to achieve certain purposes; some loses genuineness when the information is passed on from person to person. There are some basic criteria which can help us assess the credibility of certain information on the net.

Five Criteria in Assessing E-mail Credibility

1. Date: Is the date clearly stated to indicate the time the incident took place? Is the date in line with other related events?
2. The author: Who wrote this? Is he/she reliable? Does the information show any inconsistency(ies) with the author's status, professional position and/or character?
3. Purpose: What is/are the purpose(s) of composing the mail? Is it part of his job?
4. Audience: Who is the target audience?
5. Consistency: Do you find any inconsistency in the information

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N.B.: In order to preserve the originality of the e-mails, grammatical errors and/or errors in sentence structure are not corrected.

Source 1

www.sosick.org

(　　03　4　2　8　00　)

Latest SARS Infected Area in HK (as of 2003.04.02 8:00am)

Hospitals
Hong Kong Island

1　　XXXX　　　XXXXXX Hospital

2　　XXXXX Hospital

Source 2

真人真事, 不可忽視......... ＞＞＞ 今日我家姐話我知(佢係威院o既醫生), 而家威爾斯o既情況同新聞講o既有好大差　距　＞ ...＞＞ 我地會以為D記者渲染得好勁, 但係原來事實正好相反.. ＞＞有幾個威爾斯o既醫護人員已經接近死亡(其中有兩個係我家姐o

Source 3

SARS				
Dr Name				
Axx Axx Axx	xx	xx	xx	xxxxxxxxxxxx
Bxx Bxx Bxx	xx	xx	xx	xxxxxxxxxxxx
Cxx Cxx Cxx	xx	xx	xx	xxxxxxxxxxx
Dxx Dxx Dxx	xx	xx	xx	xxxxxxxxxx
Exx Exx Exx	xx	xx	xx	xxxxxxxxxx
Fxx Fxx Fxx	xx	xx	xx	xxxxxxxxxxxx
Gxx Gxx Gxx	xx	xx	xx	xxxxxxxxxxx

Source 4

我同學昨晚(28/3)漏夜打電話來,說她朋友的弟弟剛從xx工幹回來,在電話中告 訴 她,其實他還未工幹完,而是冒著被炒的危險回來,因為xx死了很多人,在他工作附近的一條村,差不多成村人瓜晒,但消息封鎖　,死都唔俾人知係肺炎,仲立刻將屍體即時燒掉,意圖毀屍滅蹟……

Source 5

xxxx　K,

,　　　!!!　　　　　　.

Tony Mok >>Prince of Wales Hospital >>Chinese University of Hong Kong

I AM at Prince of Wales every day, closely involved with all actions and still in good shape. Let me clarify the subject matter:

- There is no evidence that the infection is airborne.
- Only direct exposure to respiratory droplet has been related to infection...

非典型肺炎須知

注意個人衛生

SARS

SARS

180

3

10

5

Assessment Form for E-mail Credibility

Do you think the mails can pass the credibility test?

	Date	Author			Audience	Purpose	Consistency in content	Credibility (With reference to the table below, indicate the credibility of the source by putting ★ in the corresponding box)
		Name	Reliability	Consistency with the author's background				
Source 1								
Source 2								
Source 3								
Source 4								
Source 5								
Source 6								
Source 7								
Source 8								
Source 9								
Source 10								

★	date not specified; author not specified; unclear purpose; inconsistent in content
★★	Date and author specified; but content inconsistent with author's status, professional position and/or character; unclear purpose; inconsistent in content
★★★	Date and author specified; clear purpose; no obvious inconsistency in content
★★★★	Date and author specified; clear purpose; content consistent with author's status, professional position and/or character; no inconsistency in content
★★★★★	Date and author specified; author renowned and of high status; clear purpose; content consistent with author's status, professional position and/or character; content consistent and verifiable

Homework

Having completed the credibility test, which e-mail(s) would you choose to share with your friends? Why?

Attention

To assess the credibility of a piece of information, the list of questions in the "Five Criteria in Assessing E-mail Credibility" is but a starting point. To tell right from wrong, to discern true from fake, we have to know more, think more and experience more.